

Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The birthday of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. has been observed as a national holiday for 20 years. It resulted from a 15-year campaign that included six million Americans of all races signing petitions asking the U.S. Congress to pass the law commemorating King. The holiday falls on the third Monday in January each year.

The first bill calling for the holiday was introduced in the House of Representatives in 1968, after King was assassinated. The bill passed in both houses of Congress on October 19, 1983. President Ronald Reagan signed it into law on November 2, 1983, and it was observed for the first time on January 20, 1986, with the closing of federal offices. Since 2000, all 50 states have

Demanding equal voting rights, marchers stream across the Alabama River, beginning the five-day, 80-kilometer trek from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in March 1965.

recognized the holiday, which means most schools, banks and many large businesses close on the day.

Schools and other organizations distribute educational material to remind Americans of King's ideals of equal opportunity for all and nonviolence. Church services, choir performances, essay contests, marches and rebroadcasts of King's speeches are some of the events that occur around the holiday.

King was born on January 15, 1929. He first came to prominence in the mid-1950s when, as a Baptist preacher in Montgomery, Alabama, he led a 382-day boycott of the public transportation system. He wanted to end the law that required African Americans to ride in the backs of buses, and to stand even if seats were available in the front "white" section.



RICHARD SHEINWALD © AP/WIDE

The Celestial Singers of Detroit's Greater Grace Temple perform at the Fox Theater during a program to mark Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Eventually the Supreme Court declared Alabama's state segregation laws unconstitutional. King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which led other campaigns across the southern states to bring equal rights in

voting, schooling, housing and use of public facilities. King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 because of his insistence that the civil rights campaigners use non-violent means, not striking back even when they were beaten and jailed. —L.K.L.



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